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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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Jean Shaoul

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Sudan's prime minister resigns amid lethal military crackdown on protests

Sudan's Prime Minister Abdulla Hamdok resigned on January 2 amid a political deadlock with the military and nationwide protests that have continued since the military coup last October. His resignation came as security forces killed three people during the latest round of mass rallies, bringing the total killed to at least 60.

Military chief and de facto ruler General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan is now openly in control.

Thousands of workers and youth have taken to the streets of Khartoum, the Sudanese capital, and its twin city Omdurman, against both Hamdok and the junta, demanding an end to military rule, including the fraud of transitional civilian-military rule.



Demonstration against the coup in Khartoum (Twitter)

The political crisis takes place as the economy faces collapse under the impact of the pandemic, with growing unemployment, 360 percent inflation and soaring food prices. It follows decades of criminal looting by the ruling elite, international sanctions and the secession of South Sudan, the main oil-producing region, in 2011. In West Darfur state, dozens of people have been killed and their villages burned in conflicts between pastoralists and farmers that have seen 83,000 people displaced, and thousands more in Kordofan state since October.

The UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has estimated that more than 14 million people, one in three of the Sudanese people, will need humanitarian aid in 2022, up from the 7.9 million assisted by the UN's World Food Programme in 2021.

The military has closed telecommunication networks and deployed the security forces to suppress protests with tear gas and live and rubber bullets. They have blocked the bridges leading into the conurbation to prevent people joining the Khartoum rallies from other parts of the country.

The demonstrations are a continuation of the mass protests that erupted at the end of 2018 and precipitated the April 2019 pre-emptive military coup, led by al-Burhan with the support of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia. The military ousted President Omar al-Bashir and his Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated military dictatorship, which had ruled since 1989, to prevent the overthrow of the entire state apparatus.



Sudanese Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok (left) and US U.S. Secretary of Treasury Steven Mnuchin at the White House in 2019

Al-Burhan then opened negotiations with the leaders of the protests, the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), an umbrella group of 22 bourgeois and petty bourgeois opposition groups, including the trade unions and the Sudanese Communist Party. Just weeks later, soldiers and paramilitaries massacred more than 1,000 unarmed protesters, chasing them through Khartoum, tying concrete blocks to their feet and throwing them into the River Nile.

Despite this, in August 2019 the FFC signed a treacherous deal with the military, agreeing to serve under Hamdok, a British-trained economist and former member of the Sudanese

Communist Party, in a transitional “technocratic” government, made up of “leftists” that served as a front for the Sovereign Council headed by al-Burhan.

Hamdok went on to implement a series of free market and political reforms, including the abolition of fuel subsidies, the privatisation of hundreds of Sudan’s state companies and a crackdown on corruption and the looting of state revenues by companies linked to al-Bashir and the military. These measures, demanded by the US-dominated World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) in return for relief on \$60 billion of foreign debt, threatened the military’s substantial commercial, political and diplomatic interests.

Hamdok also acceded to Washington’s demand that Sudan join its Gulf allies and Israel in an anti-Iran block and handed al-Bashir, now in prison, to the International Criminal Court for war crimes in Darfur, where 300,000 people were killed and millions displaced in fighting between 2003 and 2008, to get Sudan removed from the US State Sponsor of Terrorism List.

After a failed putsch in September, al-Burhan dissolved the Sovereign Council and dismissed Hamdok’s “technocratic” government. He arrested Hamdok and several members of his cabinet, later releasing them to house arrest, and declared a state of emergency. He sacked the Chief Justice presiding over crucial reforms to the judicial system and released key figures in and around former dictator al-Bashir’s National Congress Party.

Al-Burhan justified the coup as a means of avoiding “civil war,” claiming the military would establish a new government and promising elections in July 2023. He proceeded to release his allies in jail on corruption and related charges; sack state and federal institutions, the state-owned media and companies, and the Central Bank with generals, Islamists and other reliable allies of the al-Bashir regime; dismantle civilian committees that had seized the assets of al-Bashir and his cronies; and restore the intelligence services’ powers to arrest and detain. His forces clamped down on protesters, killing at least 40 unarmed civilians, injuring and detaining hundreds more, while raping or gang-raping at least 13 women, according to the UN.

Al-Burhan’s calculations that the government’s economic reforms would turn workers and rural toilers against Hamdok and that the signing of the Abraham Accords with Israel

would be enough to end Sudan's three decades as a pariah state were misplaced. His efforts to use his close relations with Russia, which is trying to establish a base at Port Sudan, on the Red Sea, and the millions of refugees and displaced people in Sudan as bargaining chips against the European powers also failed.

Four weeks later, after Washington and the World Bank had frozen aid funds and the debt-relief process, al-Burhan—unable to find any credible civilians to front a military-backed government—agreed to reinstate Hamdok as head of a transitional government until elections in 2023.

The deal was brokered jointly by US imperialism and its regional allies and by lawyers and leading lights of the Republican Party, National Ummah Party, Unified Unionist Party and former Sudan Communist Party leaders, sidelining the Forces for Freedom and Change movement. The FFC, the Sudanese Professionals' Association and the Resistance Committees in Khartoum condemned the deal as treacherous.

Within weeks of Hamdok's reinstatement, the military reneged on its commitments to release all the detained activists and revoke the hated General Intelligence Service's powers of arrest and detention, authority to seize funds and other assets, and to prohibit or control the movement of people. He reappointed ambassadors dismissed following the October 25 coup. Al-Burhan said that those who had "insulted the army would be prosecuted and imprisoned."

This, and the military's continued crackdown on protests, left Hamdok unable to cobble together a cabinet that met with the military's approval.

Announcing his resignation on television, Hamdok said that the country was now "at a dangerous turning point that threatens its whole survival."

As well as the mass protests, Sudan faces rebel movements in Darfur, South Kordofan and the Blue Nile that may now abandon their October 2020 agreement with the civilian-fronted military government, as neighbouring Ethiopia descends into civil war and violent conflicts continue in South Sudan, Somalia and the neighbouring Sahel.

Sudan's key position in the Horn of Africa, bordering on the Red Sea through which 12 percent of the world's trade by volume passes, including much of the Middle East's

energy exports to Europe, has made it a focus of competing economic interests. China now rivals western countries in its loans and technical assistance to the region, while the Gulf countries have bought up some of the country's most fertile land that is now cultivated by major corporations for export. The displaced Sudanese peasants have migrated to the cities.

In the absence of an independent socialist political leadership, the mass protests face the prospect of brutal suppression by the military and betrayal by various "progressive" middle-class forces backed by US imperialism.

The US, the former colonial power Britain and the major European powers have called for the military to negotiate with civilian groups, saying they would not support a military government. Reuters cited a European diplomat saying, "The military cares very much because they know that the country will not continue without economic support. If Sudan implodes, that has serious ramifications in a lot of geostrategic issues," a reference to neighbouring Ethiopia, Libya and the Sahel.

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